Why am I digitising the Atlas Linguarum Europae?

This essay is for anyone who's found my digitised files and is wondering how I got the files and why I am doing this.

The files were kept in the personal collection of John Widdowson, who administered the survey for England and Wales whilst he was a professor at the University of Sheffield, until 2024. He has deposited other material with the University and with the British Library, but his book of the response booklets (some of which are obviously copies and not the originals) went to me.

The Atlas Linguarum Europae has been largely forgotten by linguists, which is a shame when it was such an ambitious project. It was a UNESCO-funded survey of all dialects in Europe and it has published nine fascicules of results. When I compare the fascicules with the response books, it is often hard to reconcile them: this is partly owing the very large scale for the maps but also because the phonetic system used in the fascicules is not the same as in the response books, the latter of which is akin to that used in the Survey of English Dialects. These response booklets have never been typed up before, so the issue of handwriting is outstanding. I personally find the handwriting of David Leslie, who did some of the southern sites, so hard to read that I cannot be sure of what he is indicating.

There are obvious shortcomings in the Atlas Linguarum Europae. Some respondents, most notably the one for York, are so close to Received Pronunciation that is hard to understand why they were selected for a dialect survey. This makes comparisons between areas very hard. As most sites only had one respondent and the coverage of the Atlas was not very dense (66 sites in England, 16 in Wales), the sample is barely enough to make any conclusions about English or Welsh in general.

That said, I think that some points can be subject to analysis.

One is analysis of the dialect region of the old Wessex, which has barely been analysed in recent decades. This region had less dialectal diversity in older surveys than the rest of England and so the respondents can justifiably be grouped together.

Second, analysis of rhoticity (a modern obsession amongst dialectologists of English) should be more robust than analysis of vowel sounds.

Third, this is one of the only dialect surveys that looks at the words for meal times. As this is a common subject of discussion in England, this analysis should capture some interest.

I have digitised the files so that they are not lost to the sands of time. They have flaws, but not so many flaws that they deserve to be binned. By digitising them, I am allowing anyone with access to the internet to access and analyse them. If they were to be somehow destroyed suddenly (e.g. by a fire), the files would remain online for analysis.

In particular, I am not a Welsh-speaker and cannot fully appreciate the value of the Welsh materials. By digitising the files, I am letting Welsh-speakers decide the value for themselves.